

Traditional Golf Course Design is Ideal Canada Goose Habitat

The Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*, is a large, magnificent water bird native to North America. Habitat loss, egg collecting, and over-hunting in the 1800s brought the species close to extinction by the early 1900's. Today that is hard to imagine – in many urban situations, the Canada Goose has gone from a source of great concern and admiration to a pest with soaring population numbers that has spawned an industry selling deterrent products designed to drive them away. They now frequently cause contamination of water bodies and urban landscapes with their droppings, interfere with aircraft, damage agricultural crops, and their aggressive behavior during nesting season is a human safety issue.

What happened to cause such a dramatic change in population and presence in urban landscapes? It's pretty simple really - they recognized the typical urban landscape as great habitat and adapted to human presence as a trade-off for such ideal surroundings. Canada Geese are herbivores that find well-fertilized, irrigated, mowed grass ideal both because potential predators cannot hide, and because the robust plant growth provides a continuous supply of nutritious young vegetation. Add a pond with a mowed edge and they have all they need to thrive. Interestingly, populations outside of urban landscapes are not on the increase.

A wide array of companies sell deterrent products ranging from streamers, noise cannons, flashing lights and motion sensitive water spigots to vegetation sprays and trained dogs. Most of them suggest "a combined approach" or "routinely changing deterrent strategies" to achieve goose-less success. Not too surprising, an animal with a constant supply of all it needs to live and raise young will not abandon its home easily so there is no, simple one step cure.

Some ideas that you can try on your own property that are not expensive.

The first step is to prevent well-meaning people from feeding geese directly. Next try letting the grass grow taller in any non-essential areas and making it less nutritious. Even better, establish a goose-tall fringe of vegetation several feet wide around the edge of water bodies. This causes the geese to be wary of potential lurking predators when entering or exiting the pond or stream, and makes nesting in the area less attractive for the same reason.

Because geese eat submergent pond vegetation with gusto the shoreline vegetation may need to be protected from being eaten for a growing season before a suitable fringe is established. This can be done by erecting a double-walled fence along the shoreline using construction/snow fencing, chicken wire, or other temporary but light-penetrating fencing material. The two walls should be a foot or two apart, firmly positioned against the ground.

Shoreline plant species should be seeded or planted in the protected zone and allowed to grow for one growing season thru the next spring (until sufficient height is obtained), then the fence can be removed. Ideally tall vegetation will extend six or more feet from the edge of the water. The most suitable plants for this landscape are native species, which can be very attractive if care is taken with species selection. It is best to avoid commercial seed mixes if height is a concern; they often contain very tall species.

There are additional significant benefits to this style of landscape than just deterring geese: using native species creates habitat for many other birds and animals that won't make a home in non-native plants, many native species are extremely attractive, and once established they are less expensive to maintain and require far less inputs than a mowed, fertilized, and irrigated lawn. A final, and important, benefit: both land managers and the public can return to admiring, rather than resenting, the majestic Canada Goose.

